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## THE SIN OF AMERICAN JEWISH EXCEPTIONALISM

Rachel Gordan

**Abstract:** *In recent years, scholars have offered valuable critiques of American Jewish exceptionalism that reveal the historical inaccuracy of an exceptionalist scholarly framework. However, as this essay explains, untethering Jewish studies scholarship completely from exceptionalism discourse may risk overlooking the prevalence of these beliefs and what they tell us about those who propagated them. Exceptionalism does not need to be historically accurate for it to warrant attention from scholars. Nor must scholars approve of exceptionalism, or deem it a positive, for it to be a worthy subject of study. Scholars may indeed view American Jewish exceptionalism as a fantasy that prevents believers from seeing the reality—in particular the problems—of their situation, but the fact that this fantasy had so many fervent espousers should make it a matter of interest. Examining the trail of American Jewish exceptionalist voices reveals the multiple ways these voices have been deployed.*

In 2010 historians Tony Michels and David Sorkin published important critiques of the idea of American Jewish exceptionalism.<sup>1</sup> Pointing to the tendency of Jewish studies scholars to overstate the singularity of the American Jewish experience, Michels and Sorkin demonstrated the inaccuracy of this view. Citing the example of “port Jews,” that is, European Jews experiencing the benefits of Jewish modernization in cities such as Amsterdam and London that were known for their religious tolerance and vibrant economic life, Sorkin showed that the political, religious, and economic freedoms of Jews in colonial British North America and the early republic were not as exceptional as has been assumed.<sup>2</sup> In his essay, Michels explained that neither the challenges nor the opportunities typically experienced by American Jews truly distinguished them from their European coreligionists.<sup>3</sup> As Michels elucidates, past observers and

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1. Tony Michels, “Is America ‘Different?’ A Critique of American Jewish Exceptionalism,” *Journal of American Jewish History* 96, no. 3 (September 2010): 201–24; David Sorkin, “Is American Jewry Exceptional? Comparing Jewish Emancipation in Europe and America,” *Journal of American Jewish History* 96, no. 3 (September 2010): 175–200.

2. Devin Naar’s study of the interwar experience of Jews in Greek Salonica provides another example that poses a challenge to American Jewish exceptionalism as Sorkin describes it. Devin Naar, *Jewish Salonica: Between the Ottoman Empire and Modern Greece* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016).

3. Michels, “Is America ‘Different?,”” 201.

## The Sin of American Jewish Exceptionalism

scholars arguing for American Jewish exceptionalism had been overly focused on the lack of a legal emancipation process for American Jews, reasoning that since American Jews needed “neither to seek emancipation nor defend it,” they “constituted a ‘post-Emancipation Jewry,’ one that enjoyed unprecedented levels of freedom, acceptance, and affluence within a society characterized by a fluid class structure, ethnoreligious pluralism, and a malleable national character.”<sup>4</sup> In fact, Michels argues, comparing American Jewish history to that of European Jews reveals more similar trajectories than the exceptionalists had been willing to recognize. Michels calls for an American Jewish historiography untethered from exceptionalism.<sup>5</sup>

These are valuable critiques of American Jewish exceptionalism that reveal the historical inaccuracy of an exceptionalist framework in scholarship. However, they risk overlooking the prevalence of belief in American Jewish exceptionalism, and what these voices of exceptionalism might illuminate about the Jewish experiences they express. Exceptionalism does not need to be historically accurate, after all, for it to warrant attention from scholars. Nor must scholars approve of exceptionalism, or deem it a positive (“good for the Jews” to put it in communal terms), for it to be a worthy subject of study. Indeed, scholarly investigation of American Jewish exceptionalism will likely reveal its underside. If exceptionalism were an inaccurate conclusion for American Jews to make about their experience—and both Michels and Sorkin provide substantial evidence to prove this—our scholarly curiosity should be piqued all the more as to why this belief carried so much weight. Scholars may indeed view American Jewish exceptionalism as a fantasy that prevents believers from seeing the reality—in particular, the problems—of their American situation, but the fact that this fantasy had so many fervent espousers should make it a matter of interest. Examining the trail of American Jewish exceptionalist voices reveals some of the multiple ways that these voices have been deployed: (1) As a demonstration of nationalism that frequently masked a subtext of American Jewish anxiety; (2) as a postwar American Jewish response to both the Holocaust and the American antisemitism preceding World War II; (3) as resistance to a tradition of Jewish “quietness” in other Diaspora communities where Jews were, at best, tolerated; and (4) as reinforcement of America’s color line through an embrace of American religious freedom discourse which categorized Jews as a religious rather than a racial minority.<sup>6</sup> All of these and other motivations make American Jewish exceptionalism a potentially interesting area of study.

To be sure, the critiques offered by Michels and Sorkin are not necessarily intended as a ban on exceptionalist voices in American Jewish studies. Michels is

4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*, 224.

6. On Jewish “quietness” in other countries see Jonathan Sarna, *American Judaism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004); Sarna explains that in New Amsterdam in the seventeenth century, “the operative British principle, for Jews as for other social and religious deviants from the mainstream was ‘quietness,’ akin to being ‘out of sight, out of mind’” (*Ibid.*, 11). On Jews and religious freedom discourse and its relationship to affirming America’s post-World War II color line, see Tisa Wenger, *Religious Freedom: The Contested History of an American Ideal* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 179.

not suggesting, in my understanding of his argument, that academics should avoid, in their writing and teaching, all texts endorsing this belief in the singularity of the American Jewish experience. Michels's argument, rather, seems to call for scholars to be attentive to the fact that such exceptionalism has been taken for granted and embedded within the field, becoming a prism through which scholars and laypeople view the American Jewish experience. Scholars are not required to accept the exceptionalist framework, Michels's critique reminds us. In fact, his argument is that we should reject it *as a scholarly framework*.

This essay seeks to bring new questions to bear on scholarly conversations about American Jewish exceptionalism by shifting our attention to the voices of those who propounded this claim rather than to the later second-order comparative discourse. In order to clarify certain theoretical stakes of American Jewish exceptionalism, I will examine some of its manifestations at one of the high-tide periods of American Jewish exceptionalism: the immediate post-World War II era. As Michels has shown, the 1950s—around the time of American Jewry's tercentenary celebrations in 1954—were years when several Jewish historians, scholars, and writers expressed a celebratory attitude about the American Jewish experience.<sup>7</sup> If contemporary scholars of American Jews resist the urge to dismiss these exceptionalist voices from the past—an urge that, as this essay will show, has its own history and connections to our contemporary political moment—they can fruitfully pursue the question: *Why* did individuals believe in and express American Jewish exceptionalism? My claim is that more of the affective dimension of the American Jewish experience is uncovered by retaining these voices in our scholarship.

For those who study Jewish history, one of the broad questions is: What was it like to be a Jew at a particular time, in a particular place? What it *felt* like to be a Jew is ideally part of the answer to that question. For many articulate American Jews, based on their writing, the post-World War II years were experienced as an exceptional time. Whether or not contemporary scholars agree with this assessment, allowing these voices of exceptionalism into their canon is important for the sake of historical accuracy.

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF FANTASY

Like the broader issue of American exceptionalism—a discourse that includes “a complex assemblage of theological and secular assumptions out of which Americans have developed the lasting belief in America as the fulfillment of the national ideal to which other nations aspire”—American Jewish exceptionalism is most fruitfully conceptualized as a belief or a fantasy.<sup>8</sup> Rather than consisting of empirical arguments and quantitative evidence, exceptionalism is generally expressive of yearnings, fantasies, and beliefs. Here it may be helpful to categorize exceptionalist thinking in both strong and weak modes: strong exceptionalism denotes the idea that the American Jewish experience is beyond

7. Michels, “Is America ‘Different?’” 202.

8. Donald Pease, *The New American Exceptionalism* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 7.

comparison throughout time and space (to wit, that there has never been a better country for Jews than the United States); weak exceptionalism refers to the idea that in a particular time and place, signs of strong *belief* in American Jewish exceptionalism are evident (that in the immediate post–World War II years, for example, one finds many and varied voices proclaiming the singularity of the American Jewish experience and relatively few voices claiming the Jewish exceptionalism of other countries).<sup>9</sup> David Sorkin’s recent synthetic history of Jewish emancipation reveals some of the problems with the strong mode of American Jewish exceptionalism.<sup>10</sup> Sorkin expands the meaning of emancipation beyond the granting of citizenship, to refer to processes of equalization and release from an inferior status in society.<sup>11</sup> With this broader definition, Sorkin shows that emancipation was not only a European Jewish experience, as is often assumed, but has been, and continues to be an experience common to Jews and other once-persecuted groups from all over the world.<sup>12</sup> Sorkin names two periods in the American context—the nineteenth century, when American Jews struggled for political rights in certain states, and the post–World War II years—as key emancipation eras for American Jews.<sup>13</sup> The idea that American Jews did not experience emancipation—a linchpin of American Jewish exceptionalism—is undone in Sorkin’s reading of American Jewish history.

However, Sorkin’s analysis of emancipation does—perhaps, inadvertently—provide support for the weak mode of American Jewish exceptionalism. In his new history of Jewish emancipation, Sorkin describes the unprecedented success of postwar Jews in achieving equality: “In the period after World War II, American Jewry’s civil defense organizations engaged in a concerted emancipation campaign. Jews collaborated with African Americans, Catholics, and other minorities to end inequality. That campaign succeeded: from the 1940s to the 1960s state and federal civil rights laws, and court rulings prohibiting discrimination, dismantled the structure of inequality. Those events constituted American Jews’ second emancipation: it positioned the immigrant’s children and grandchildren to realize the promise of American equality.”<sup>14</sup>

9. Michels seems to allow for weak exceptionalism: in describing the post–World War II years: “In the aftermath of Nazi devastation and amid the expansion of Soviet totalitarianism.... Nobody could doubt that the United States proved hospitable to Jews to an unprecedented degree” (“Is America ‘Different?’,” 220).

10. David Sorkin, *Jewish Emancipation: A History across Five Centuries* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019).

11. *Ibid.*, 1–2.

12. Pierre Birbaum and Ira Katznelson’s study of emancipation is a prominent example of the way the United States has traditionally been excluded from the conceptions of “Jewish emancipation.” Although their book includes a chapter on Jews in America, that essay points out that in the United States, “Jews could secure legal and political emancipation merely by entering.... The United States was attractive to Jews as the western nation that gave the most sustained expression to the universal and instrumental values of the Enlightenment.” Ira Katznelson, “Between Separation and Disappearance: Jews on the Margin of American Liberalism,” in *Paths of Emancipation: Jews, States, and Citizenship*, ed. Pierre Birbaum and Ira Katznelson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 158.

13. Sorkin, *Jewish Emancipation*, chapter 27.

14. *Ibid.*, 346.

As Sorkin and other scholars have shown, the fifteen to twenty years after World War II were a period when American Jews and Judaism achieved an elevated status—in part, because of the ascendancy of a Cold War Judeo-Christian tradition, or “trifait’h” paradigm that did not find a parallel, in the late 1940s and 1950s, in European countries.<sup>15</sup> The postwar (through 1965) elevation of the status of American Jews and Judaism, and the centrality of Jews, Judaism, and *anti*-antisemitism to the postwar liberalization of American society, in other words, were *sui generis*.

In this weak mode, the discourse about Jewish American exceptionalism resembles that of American exceptionalism, which “operates less like a collection of discrete, potentially falsifiable descriptions of American society than as a fantasy through which U.S. citizens bring these contradictory political and cultural descriptions into correlation with one another through the desires that make them meaningful,” as Daniel Pease writes in *The New American Exceptionalism*.<sup>16</sup> Pease builds on Jacqueline Rose’s theories regarding the role of fantasy in public and private identities. Rose shows that “fantasy—far from being the antagonist of public, social, being—plays a central, constitutive role in the modern world of states and nations.”<sup>17</sup> In Rose’s reading, the psychic and emotional components of national identity are central.

Psychic and emotional investments in a belief or fantasy of exceptionalism depend on constructing a belief in American (Jewish) exceptionalism that derives, in part, from the social imaginaries and attributes that are cast as constitutive of other nations.<sup>18</sup> In the case of American exceptionalism, it is an image of Europe as “that which could not find reflection in the U.S. mirror” that is central.<sup>19</sup> If American exceptionalism represents the United States “as an exception to norms of Europeanization” that “promoted an understanding of the United States as the standard for the future of democracy that Europe should emulate,” American Jewish exceptionalism similarly imagines a European

15. Historian Udi Greenberg’s research on post–World War II (late 1940s and 1950s) European religious pluralism shows that “in stark contrast to parallel developments in the United States, Jews were almost universally absent from the European Catholic-Protestant dialogue. Questioning antisemitism or building communal ties with the continent’s remaining Jews was confined to vanishingly small circles, and not a single prominent European ecumenist published systematically on the topic at the time.” Greenberg, “Catholics, Protestants, and the Violent Birth of European Religious Pluralism,” *American Historical Review* 124, no. 2 (April 2019): 524. In keeping with the midcentury US embrace of Jews and Judaism as part of the postwar mainstream, Shaul Magid explains the Judeo-Christian tradition as “one way the theo-political-territorial notion of American exceptionalism can also include the Jews.” Shaul Magid, “The Judeo-Christian Tradition,” in *Theologies of American Exceptionalism*, ed. Winnifred Fallers Sullivan and Elizabeth Shakman Hurd (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020). On the creation and transformation of Judeo-Christianity, see K. Healan Gaston, *Imagining Judeo-Christian America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).

16. Pease, *New American Exceptionalism*, 8.

17. Jacqueline Rose, *States of Fantasy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 4.

18. Pease, *New American Exceptionalism*, 10.

19. *Ibid.*

## The Sin of American Jewish Exceptionalism

Jewish experience that did not share the benefits of American Jewish life and was qualitatively inferior to the American Jewish experience.

### A CHANGE IN AFFECT

The emotions characteristic of midcentury American Jewish exceptionalist writing are particularly apparent in contrast to what came before. Writings about American Jews and Judaism from the 1920s through the early 1940s, whether written by Jews or non-Jews, often displayed a bleak sense of despair, while those from the immediate postwar years were characterized by awe, amazement, and gratitude. An example of the earlier writing: a 1936 *Fortune Magazine* article, "Jews in America," opened with these observations: "The apprehensiveness of American Jews has become one of the important influences in the social life of our time. It is important to non-Jews as well as to Jews. Any nation which permits a minority to live in fear of persecution is a nation which invites disaster. Fearful minorities become suspicious minorities and suspicious minorities, their defensive reactions set on the hair trigger of anxiety, create the animosities they dread."<sup>20</sup> This dispiriting view of American Jewish life was just as apparent in the writings of Jews. For example, Mordecai Kaplan's 1934 *Judaism as a Civilization* opened with Kaplan's survey of the contemporary American Jewish scene and his observation that it "abounds in signs of ill omen for the future of Judaism. The number of Jews who regret they are not Gentiles is legion."<sup>21</sup>

Jewishness in America was frequently portrayed as a misfortune and a handicap. And this is not from the pens of those seeking to abandon their Jewishness, but from those Jews, such as Kaplan, who cared deeply about Jews and Judaism. Aware of the suffering and challenges faced by their coreligionists, these Jewish leaders and writers understood the sad truth of American Jewish sentiment. Kaplan contrasted the feelings he observed ("If I had my choice,' a prominent American Jewish woman is quoted as saying, 'I would have asked God to make me a Gentile, but since I had no choice I pray to Him to help me be a good Jewess'") with the liturgy ("Praised be thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, that Thou has not made me a Gentile"). In the wide chasm between these two emotional registers, Kaplan found evidence of what he viewed as the "sense of frustration and rootlessness which gnaws at the heart of many young Jews, and the wistful yearnings by which they are tortured as they contrast what they consider the rich and colorful lives of their Christian neighbors with the drab existence of their own people."<sup>22</sup>

Feelings of despair about Jewishness are evident in a range of genres during the first half of the twentieth century. Novelist Edna Ferber's 1917 semi-autobiographical novel *Fanny, Herself* includes an exchange between Fanny and a friendly priest in which they discuss Fanny's perception of her Jewish

20. "Jews in America," *Fortune Magazine*, February 1, 1936, 85.

21. Mordecai Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization* (New York: Thomas Yoseff, 1934), 3–4.

22. *Ibid.*, 4.



difference. Fanny acknowledges, “Yes, I’ve got that handicap.”<sup>23</sup> A prominent midcentury rabbi, Milton Steinberg (1903–1950) of Park Avenue Synagogue, was well acquainted with his congregants’ perception of Jewishness as sickness: “Occasionally one meets a Jew in whom the malady is virulent, a Jew who literally hates Judaism, other Jews and himself,” he wrote.<sup>24</sup> Steinberg’s 1941 essay “To Be or Not to Be a Jew” focused on the feelings of inadequacy that Steinberg believed haunted the modern Jew, based on his experience as a rabbi, even though “it is an elementary principle of psychology that a person must approve of himself if he is to be happy and creative. . . . It is in this sine qua non of psychic health which the American Jew is in danger of losing.”<sup>25</sup> In the early 1940s, the Jewish Reconstructionist movement defined its platform in response to the “malady of doubt and discouragement” among American Jews concerning their Jewishness.<sup>26</sup> Henry Morgenthau III, the son of the secretary of treasury under FDR, would recall his parents’ attitude toward Jewishness as “a kind of birth defect that could not be eradicated, but with proper treatment, could be overcome, if not in this generation then probably in the next.”<sup>27</sup>

Postwar improvements in Jewish socioeconomic and civic status contributed to a transformation of Jewishness from being experienced as a handicap/illness to being experienced as an identity, a change that signaled newfound pride and a sense of security. As the activist and writer Andrew Solomon has observed, “We often use *illness* to disparage a way of being, and *identity* to validate that same way of being.”<sup>28</sup> In the late 1940s and 1950s, this change intertwined with a transformation in emotions and attitudes of both Jews and non-Jews toward Jewishness. Patterns of emotion, or “structures of feelings,” to use theorist Raymond Williams’s concept, toward Jewishness were transformed.<sup>29</sup> In sum, the Jewishness that had earlier been viewed as a threat, handicap, or, at best, a curiosity seemed, in the immediate postwar years, on its way to becoming an identity fostering pride.<sup>30</sup> These new emotions soon found their way into Jewish writing, including the writing of Jewish history.

23. Edna Ferber, *Fanny, Herself* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1917), 121.

24. Milton Steinberg, *A Partisan Guide to the Jewish Problem* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1945), 115.

25. Milton Steinberg, “To Be or Not to Be a Jew,” *Common Ground* (Spring 1941): 5–6.

26. *The Reconstructionist Platform* (New York: The Jewish Reconstructionist Foundation, 1942), 4.

27. Michael Beschloss, *The Conquerors: Roosevelt, Truman and the Destruction of Hitler’s Germany, 1941–1945* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), 46.

28. Andrew Solomon, *Far from the Tree: Parents, Children and the Search for Identity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012), 5.

29. British theorist Raymond Williams uses this concept in his 1954 *Preface to Film* and in his 1977 *Marxism and Literature*. Williams explains that he uses the word “feeling” to distinguish these attitudes and emotions from the more formal “worldview” or “ideology”: “It is thus a specific structure of particular linkages, particular emphases and suppressions, and, in what are often its most recognizable forms, particular deep starting-points and conclusions.” Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 134.

30. Louis Finkelstein, forward to *The Jews: Their History, Culture, and Religion* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1949), xxii.



## The Sin of American Jewish Exceptionalism

### POST-WORLD WAR II AMERICAN JEWISH EXCEPTIONALISM

Since the 1950s, when the study of American Jewish history began to coalesce, exceptionalism has been central to the field, Michels argues.<sup>31</sup> Although the term “exceptionalism” was rarely used in mid-twentieth-century studies, the idea of the *American* Jewish experience as singular was at least implicit in American Jewish history from the 1950s through the field’s coming-of-age in the 1980s, continuing into the twenty-first century.

As examples, Michels cites midcentury publications such as Oscar Handlin’s *Adventure in Freedom: Three Hundred Years of Jewish Life in America*, and Ben Halpern’s essay, “America Is Different.”<sup>32</sup> The list, of course, is more expansive. I would add several popular fiction and nonfiction titles to this list of mid-twentieth-century texts expressing versions of American Jewish exceptionalism: Laura Z. Hobson’s novel *Gentleman’s Agreement* (1947); Harold Ribalow’s *This Land, These People* (1950); Herman Wouk’s *Marjorie Morningstar* (1955); Will Herberg’s *Protestant-Catholic-Jew* (1955); and C. Bezalel Sherman’s *The Jew within American Society* (1960), to name a few.

Implicitly and explicitly, these midcentury books communicated the idea that the United States held unique possibilities for the Jews. Even in a novel such as *Gentleman’s Agreement*, which at first glance would seem to be about American Jewish *problems*, Hobson’s underlying message—likely accounting for its popularity among Jews and non-Jews alike—was that the United States was uniquely suited to solving the problem of antisemitism, due to its commitment to equality and religious freedom, and the status of Judaism in the United States as one of the country’s three major religions. Anticipating Will Herberg’s argument in *Protestant-Catholic-Jew* by several years, *Gentleman’s Agreement* includes a scene in which protagonist Phil Green explains to his son, “You can be an American and a Catholic, or an American and a Protestant, or an American and a Jew.”<sup>33</sup> Herberg would observe eight years later that in the United States, there was no longer a taint of foreignness to Americans who adhered to any of the “three great American ‘faiths,’” and “Not to be—that is, not to identify oneself and be identified as—either a Protestant, a Catholic, or a Jew is somehow not to be an American.”<sup>34</sup> In fiction and nonfiction, both Hobson and Herberg, as with many observers of the midcentury Jewish experience, noted an exceptional change in status of postwar Jews.

31. As Michels has shown, American Jewish exceptionalist thinking has been prevalent in both scholarly and popular writing and discussion since at least the nineteenth century, when American Jewish communal leaders began declaring that Jews were uniquely suited to the blessings of the United States. Tony Michels, “Is America Different? Antisemitism and the Belief in American Exceptionalism” (Paper presented at University of Florida, March 12, 2020).

32. Michels cites midcentury publications such as Oscar Handlin, *Adventure in Freedom: Three Hundred Years of Jewish Life in America* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1954), and Ben Halpern, “America Is Different,” *Midstream* 1, Autumn 1955, 39–52.

33. Laura Z. Hobson, *Gentleman’s Agreement* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1947), 34.

34. Will Herberg, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology* (New York: Doubleday, 1955), 278, 274.

To the above popular titles proclaiming a singular postwar American Jewish experience I would also add, to varying degrees, the “Introduction to Judaism” primers published in the 1940s and 1950s. Many of these—explanations of Judaism, in the form of both popular magazine articles and books, for a general readership—were imbued with the idea that in this country (the US), at this time (the post–World War II years), Jews enjoyed unprecedented freedom and support to practice their religion. Exemplary of this genre is Arthur A. Cohen’s 1959 essay “Why I Choose to Be a Jew” for *Harper’s* magazine.<sup>35</sup> At that time, an explanation of Jewish beliefs in a mainstream magazine was an exceptional event. “I do not think I have seen in any popular magazine anything like this firm and clear exposition of the basic ideas of Jewish belief,” Rabbi Louis Finkelstein, chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, wrote to Cohen after reading a draft of Cohen’s essay under review at *Harper’s*.<sup>36</sup> Cohen—a respected novelist, theologian, art critic, and publisher—observed in his *Harper’s* essay: “In the United States today, it is at last possible to choose not to remain a Jew.”<sup>37</sup> That claim—itself a declaration of American Jewish exceptionalism—led to new and singular implications for voluntarily choosing Judaism, as Cohen went on to explain in his essay.<sup>38</sup> While Jews had been accustomed to perceiving their Jewishness as a matter of loyalty to the Jewish people or the Jewish state, Cohen observed, in the late 1950s, remaining a Jew held the possibility of being experienced and perceived as a religious choice.

Publishing his essay in *Harper’s* rather than in a Jewish magazine may have been a sign that Cohen was particularly concerned with the views of non-Jews; perhaps he wanted his majority non-Jewish readership to understand how postwar American Jews conceptualized Judaism and religion. In this way, Cohen’s 1959 essay was more in the spirit of the Judeo-Christianity that he would later criticize in his 1969 essay, “The Myth of Judeo-Christianity.”<sup>39</sup> By that point, the high-tide era of American Jewish exceptionalism was over, as events including the civil rights movement, the 1965 immigration act, a changing perception of Israel among liberals in the wake of the 1967 Six Day War, and American Jewry’s more solidly middle-class profile affected both understandings of pluralism in America and Jews’ role therein.<sup>40</sup> The trifaith or Judeo-Christian

35. Arthur A. Cohen, “Why I Choose to Be a Jew,” *Harper’s*, April 1959, 61–66.

36. Louis Finkelstein to Arthur A. Cohen, March 30, 1959, MSS 496, box 24, folder “Why I Choose to Be a Jew,” *Harper’s Magazine*, April 1959, Arthur A. Cohen Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

37. Cohen, “Why I Choose to Be a Jew,” 61.

38. Arthur Cohen, “The Myth of the Judeo-Christian Tradition,” *Commentary*, November 1, 1969, 77. On Cohen’s essay see Emmanuel Nathan and Anya Topolski, “The Myth of a Judeo-Christian Tradition: Introducing a European Perspective,” in *Is There a Judeo-Christian Tradition? A European Perspective*, ed. Emmanuel Nathan and Anya Topolski (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2016), 1. Cohen’s critique of the Judeo-Christian tradition was based on his view that this era of supposed comity between religions was in fact an era lacking in religious substance.

39. Cohen, “Myth of the Judeo-Christian Tradition,” 73–77.

40. Although the post–World War II years (roughly 1945–1965) mark a high point in American Jewish exceptionalist thinking, this discourse certainly did not end after 1965. Kenneth Wald’s study of

paradigm of the 1950s no longer represented an ideal of pluralism in the way it had a decade earlier. In *Harper's*, Cohen's essay presented a confluence in Jewish and Christian understandings of religion: both Christianity and Judaism could now be chosen freely, both prioritized belief and dogma. Contrary to the view of many rabbis and Jewish leaders of his time, Cohen insisted that theology was not a field restricted to Christians; faith was as important to Jews and Judaism as it was to Christians.<sup>41</sup> Thus, Cohen wrote of his motivations to remain a Jew: "My choice was religious."<sup>42</sup> He went on to explain, "I chose to believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; to acknowledge the law of Moses as the word of God; to accept the people of Israel as the holy instrument of divine fulfillment; to await the coming of the messiah and the redemption of history."<sup>43</sup> If Cohen's religious path sounded vaguely Christian, with its professions of faith (Cohen also referred to himself as having undergone a "conversion" back to Judaism), there were good reasons: he understood his return to Judaism as having occurred "through the medium of Christianity" similar to that of Franz Rosenzweig (1886–1926), the German Jewish thinker whose writing Cohen admired.<sup>44</sup>

In his essay, Cohen reflected on the difference between his own religious experience and that of earlier generations, in a way that likely resonated with many readers: "My parents went to synagogue to observe the great Jewish holidays.... but worship at home, knowledge of the liturgy, familiarity with Hebrew, concern with religious thought and problems, did not occupy them," Cohen wrote, explaining that the preoccupations of his parents' generation diverged from his own. "Their real concern—and they were not unique—was adjusting to American life, achieving security, and passing to their children and those less fortunate the rewards of their struggle."<sup>45</sup> Unlike earlier generations and more religious Jews, who had grown up and been educated in homes of high Jewish observance and literacy, Cohen described returning to Judaism *as a religion* after having been educated in secular, but de facto Protestant, settings, and in a home with low Jewish literacy and religious observance. Cohen employed a Protestant conception of religion, based on individual, private faith, that *Harper's*

American Jewish political behavior traces parts of the genealogy of American Jewish exceptionalist thinking, both before and after the midcentury moment. Kenneth Wald, *The Foundations of American Jewish Liberalism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019). Marc Dollinger, in *Black Power, Jewish Politics*, explains the evolution of exceptionalist discourse in the post-1965 years as it shifted to a focus on Jewish liberal politics and activism in the latter third of the twentieth century. Marc Dollinger, *Black Power, Jewish Politics: Reinventing the Alliance in the 1960s* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2018); Dollinger, "American Jewish Liberalism Revisited: Two Perspectives: Exceptionalism and Jewish Liberalism," *Journal of American Jewish History* 90, no. 2 (June 2002): 161.

41. Cohen, "Why I Choose to be a Jew," 63.

42. *Ibid.*, 61.

43. *Ibid.*, 61–62.

44. *Ibid.*, 62. Paul Mendes-Flohr, forward to *Franz Rosenzweig: His Life and Thought*, by Nahum Glatzer, ed. Paul Mendes-Flohr, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York: Hackett, 1998), xli.

45. Cohen, "Why I Choose to Be a Jew," 62.

readers evidently expected.<sup>46</sup> As *Harper's* editor Robert Silvers instructed Cohen, when the two corresponded about Cohen's article, readers "will be looking for a quite specific and straightforward statement of the things you do believe—the dogmas and conceptions in your mind."<sup>47</sup> In writing about religion and faith, however, Cohen was not simply taking cues from the *Harper's* editorial staff and their projections of readers' expectations; it was Cohen's belief that during this singular era of the American Jewish experience, religion had become unusually salient. As Cohen wrote to Silvers, following one of their conversations about Cohen's essay, after "the factum brutum of genocide and the emergence of a somewhat questionable but undeniable Jewish nationalism in Israel," the question facing American Jewry was "not how to survive, but how to endure, not how to hold on, but how to make its inner life authentic.... The issue then is not Jewish culture, Jewish ethnocentricity, Jewish language, but Jewish religion."<sup>48</sup> This revival of interest in Jewish religion was part of what made the era unusual.

Indeed, distinct social realities had led to very different career and spiritual possibilities for Cohen's generation, compared with that of his parents. Arthur's father, Isidore Cohen, had joined his father's clothing business as a salesman after graduating from Townsend Harris High School in Queens, eventually becoming president of Joseph H. Cohen & Sons, a leading manufacturer of men's clothing.<sup>49</sup> Isidore Cohen's young adulthood was spent building a business and gaining the kind of economic foothold that allowed him to send his children to private schools and universities, and to become a philanthropist and art collector. A generation after Isidore Cohen began his job as a salesman, Arthur Cohen left his parents' Park Avenue home for the University of Chicago. As an undergraduate, Cohen's most pressing concerns were his own spiritual crisis,<sup>50</sup> which Cohen described in his 1959 *Harper's* essay, and navigating his intellectual and career path.

Anticipating the religious questing of future generations of American Jews, a twenty-one-year-old Arthur traveled to Israel in 1949, seeking a deeper

46. On religion as a Protestant category and its relationship to Jews and Judaism, see Leora Batnitzky, *How Judaism Became a Religion: An Introduction to Modern Jewish Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011).

47. Robert B. Silvers to Arthur A. Cohen, June 4, 1958, Arthur A. Cohen Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature.

48. Arthur A. Cohen to Robert Silvers, "An Outline Discussion on Why I Am a Jew," Arthur A. Cohen Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature.

49. "Isidore M. Cohen, 93, A Clothing Executive," *New York Times*, July 15, 1991, D10. By 1967, a cover story on Joseph H. Cohen & Sons in *Clothes* magazine reported that the company had become "the largest volume men's clothing manufacturing operation in the country, a business which this year will do \$45 million." "Joseph H. Cohen & Sons: Where Volume Equals Profits," *Clothes*, February 1, 1967, 20.

50. Cohen wrote of his parents' response to his teenage angst over the question of whether to remain a Jew, or convert to Christianity: "I was rushed, not to a psychoanalyst, but to a Rabbi—the late Milton Steinberg, one of the most gifted and profound Jewish thinkers of recent years." Cohen, "Why I Choose to be a Jew," 62.

## The Sin of American Jewish Exceptionalism

understanding of his Jewish identity and of the new Jewish state.<sup>51</sup> From Jerusalem, Cohen typed long letters to his parents about his evolving feelings and experiences, often declaring his independence from his parents as he shared with them his new beliefs and religious practices (“laying of Tefillim [*sic*] and prayer before retiring”) that had not been the custom in the Cohen household.<sup>52</sup>

The financial security that his parents provided allowed a young Arthur to roam widely—geographically, intellectually, and spiritually. Isidore Cohen’s prosperity also enabled him to support his more idealistically and academically inclined son, who was attempting to figure out his future, and determine how to “be more valuable to myself and to humankind” as he wrote to his parents in the fall of 1945, from Chicago. “Your darling, secure son is at this moment lost in a web of confusion,” Arthur wrote, explaining his state of uncertainty about whether to remain at the university, become a teacher, a rabbi, or something else.<sup>53</sup> Exerting no pressure on his son to join the family business, Isidore instead responded with the kind of reassurance that might have been inconceivable a generation earlier: “I feel you should continue your studies, and continue being just as you are without worrying where the cards will fall. Fortunately for you, you have no financial troubles ahead of you.” Although Isidore’s world was in business, he could imagine other possibilities for his son, who was coming of age in a very different America. He advised Arthur:

If you are sufficiently idealistic, you can devote yourself to the avenues that will open up for you when the propitious moment arrives, and God knows what that endeavor will be.... It may be as leader among Jews. It may even be as leader for the colored race. It may be as a labor leader.... Remember, it isn’t necessary that you save the whole world. If in your particular little spot, you can do the job that pleases you, that should be all you need to bring you happiness; and that after all is the real goal in life—that of leading a full life of happiness. I know you understand when I say “happiness” I don’t mean the material things in life. I mean true and genuine happiness, which I know only too well you can readily understand.<sup>54</sup>

Were it made today, Isidore’s suggestion that his son consider becoming a “leader for the colored race,” would reek of white privilege and paternalism. But like the midcentury voices of American Jewish exceptionalism—to which Isidore’s optimism about his son effecting social change was linked—it is a statement that should be historicized. In 1945, Isidore’s views indicated progressive tendencies,

51. See MSS 496, box 42, folder, Correspondence 1940s, Arthur A. Cohen Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature.

52. Arthur A. Cohen to Mother and Dad, September 27, 1949, folder, Correspondence 1940s, Arthur A. Cohen Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature.

53. Arthur A. Cohen to Mom, Pop, and Sis, undated, MSS 496, box 42, folder, AAC. 1940, Arthur Allen Cohen Correspondence, 1928–1950, folder 1, Arthur A. Cohen Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature.

54. Isidore M. Cohen to Arthur A. Cohen, November 2, 1945, folder, Correspondence 1940s, Arthur A. Cohen Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature.

and a very particular post–World War II vision of Jews as central to the liberalizing of American culture.<sup>55</sup>

In the post–World War II years, increasing numbers of American Jewish parents were better able to engage in these kinds of high-minded conversations with their children. Their unprecedented freedoms, born out of greater social acceptance, decreasing antisemitism, and economic security, created conditions that made possible new kinds of postwar American experiences and expectations. When writers such as Cohen noted their singular Jewish experience (“Until the present day, the Jew could not choose to be a Jew,” Cohen wrote in *Harper’s*), they were often referring to a new reality undergirded by changed socioeconomic circumstances.

Another Jewish New Yorker of Cohen’s generation, Nathan Glazer, had already published his more academic introductory text *American Judaism* (1957).<sup>56</sup> As a sociologist, Glazer examined the kinds of socioeconomic shifts that separated Arthur Cohen’s experience from that of his father and that would increasingly characterize the postwar generation. In Glazer’s analysis, an “economic advantage” had been building even during the 1930s, “in the form of superior education and experience in business” that “bore fruit in the years of prosperity” after World War II, when American Jews “became an extremely prosperous group, probably as prosperous as some of the oldest and longest-established elements of the population of the United States.”<sup>57</sup> Here was a version of the weak mode of American Jewish exceptionalism described above: postwar American Jews underwent unparalleled economic success. But that economic shift did not account for the entirety of the exceptionalism of the postwar moment—the new prominence and respectability of Judaism as an American religion was also crucial.<sup>58</sup>

55. For explanations of this postwar American Jewish vision, see Joyce Antler, *The Journey Home: Jewish Women and the American Century* (New York: The Free Press, 1997), chapter 9; Marc Dollinger, *Quest for Inclusion: Jews and Liberalism in Modern America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); Dollinger, *Black Power, Jewish Politics*; Rachel Kranson, *Ambivalent Embrace: Jewish Upward Mobility in Postwar America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), chapter 2; Stuart Svonkin, *Jews against Prejudice: American Jews and the Fight for Civil Liberties* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

56. On Glazer’s view of postwar American Judaism, see Rachel Gordan, “Nathan Glazer’s *American Judaism*,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 105, no. 4 (Fall 2015): 482–506.

57. Nathan Glazer, *American Judaism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 108.

58. Evidence of this midcentury prominence and respectability of Judaism as an American religion are found in events from the sadness of the Dorchester disaster to the celebration of presidential inaugurations. In their widely memorialized death aboard the *SS Dorchester* in January 1943, four chaplains, two Protestants, a Catholic, and Jew, came to symbolize America’s Judeo-Christian tradition; they were honored with a 1948 commemorative US postal stamp. And, the mid-twentieth century was the first time since Rabbi Gershom Seixas had participated in President George Washington’s 1789 inauguration that rabbis offered prayers at the inaugurations, beginning with Reform rabbi Samuel Thurman’s benediction at Harry Truman’s 1949 inauguration and continuing through four midcentury inaugurations, with Reform rabbi Nelson Glueck offering the benediction at President Kennedy’s 1961 inauguration.

## The Sin of American Jewish Exceptionalism

The socioeconomic changes of the postwar generation, Glazer's book explained, were among the major causes for the turn from *Jewishness* to *Judaism*. Rejecting two commonly cited reasons for this transformation (the Holocaust and the new State of Israel), Glazer instead explained the "religious revival in American Judaism in the postwar period" as largely caused by changes also occurring in the broader American population: the move out of urban ethnic enclaves and into the suburbs. Connected to these was the rise of middle-class values among newly suburbanized Jews. The Judeo-Christian and trifaith paradigms of the late 1940s and 1950s and the Cold War also created a cultural landscape, as Will Herberg famously described in his 1955 book, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew*, in which affiliation with one of the three American religions became integral to middle-class identity.<sup>59</sup> Glazer described the changing meaning of Jewishness in this context: "Jewishness as a program for life in America—that is, the idea that the Jews in America could continue as a group defined not primarily by religion but by secular culture and quasi-national feeling—was recognized as impossible." In contrast, Glazer observed that in the postwar years, "Judaism, in all its branches, was flourishing."<sup>60</sup> It was the stirrings of those shifts—toward economic security and increased interest in Judaism as a religion—that underlay Arthur Cohen's turn to Judaism. In the introduction of *American Judaism*, Glazer reflected:

It would be an interesting essay in the history of ideas to determine just how the United States evolved in the popular mind from "Christian" nation into a nation made of Catholics, Protestants, and Jews. The most interesting part of such a study—which I do not plan to undertake here—would be to discover how it came about that the Jewish group, which through most of the history of the United States has formed an insignificant percentage of the American people, has come to be granted the status of "most favored religion."<sup>61</sup>

Glazer's observation is at the core of mid-twentieth-century American Jewish exceptionalism. His reflections about the dramatic change in status of American Jews registers some of the emotion surrounding the 1950s American Jewish exceptionalist arguments, that is, wonder at the shifts in American attitudes toward Jews that he had experienced in his own lifetime. For Jewish scholars and writers such as Glazer, who was born in 1923 and had been a young man during the much more antisemitic 1930s and early 1940s, it was likely difficult *not* to feel some measure of awe and perhaps even celebration at the transformation in society that had occurred since World War II. In an obverse way, we might compare how midcentury scholars and writers, such as Glazer, described the newfound security of postwar American Jews with how scholars in our own

59. Herberg, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew*.

60. Glazer, *American Judaism*, 108.

61. *Ibid.*, 1. Glazer's statement marks the entry point for my own scholarship on post-World War II American Judaism. How and why American Jews and Judaism came to assume a higher status in the post-World War II era is a major question I seek to answer through my research of mid-twentieth-century middlebrow American Jewish culture. See my forthcoming article in the *Journal of Religion and American Culture*.



day write about the recent rise in public acts of American antisemitism since 2016. Contemporary scholars are often unnerved and deeply disheartened about the change in circumstances; in the immediate postwar years, scholars were surprised by the positive change of events.

#### SCHOLARS AND AMERICAN JEWISH EXCEPTIONALISM TODAY

The critiques of Michels and Sorkin, described earlier, have provided an important corrective within Jewish studies. Their arguments have influenced the field, at the very least making scholars more self-conscious about how they frame the study of American Jews.<sup>62</sup> Even before these 2010 *American Jewish History* essays, scholars had begun to show greater awareness of historical narratives that suggested exceptionalism. Scholars of American Jewish literature, in particular, perhaps out of sensitivity to what they felt were the unreliable narrators of the Jewish experience, have shown greater caution in reading Jewish authors' expressions of exceptionalism as unmitigated truths. As the earlier mention of *Gentleman's Agreement* illustrates, fiction has been an ideal genre for extending exceptionalism to its imaginable extremes. (Novelist Laura Z. Hobson made the unimaginable—a non-Jew choosing to be Jewish in 1940s America—seem believable.) In one assessment of the difficulties of balancing the problems inherent in Jewish literary exceptionalism with the voices of those propounding its reality, in the 2003 *Cambridge Companion to American Jewish Literature*, editors Michael Kramer and Hana Wirth-Nesher write:

It is certainly tempting to tell the story of Jewish American literary history in this celebratory, appreciative tone—as a movement from trouble to triumph, darkness to light, slavery to redemption, cultural deprivation to cultural flowering. And it is difficult to deny that many Jews, among them many Jewish writers and scholars, have thought of the American experience in just this way. But the story conceals as much as it reveals. To begin with, Jewish creativity did not begin in America, nor has it ever been restricted to periods free from persecution and turmoil. The Jews did not need America in order to flourish creatively. But they did flourish differently there, and that story needs to be told.<sup>63</sup>

That the “Jews did not need America in order to flourish creatively” is a bold statement, one that expresses confidence that Jewish creativity was independent of American influence. And it is a statement that is difficult to imagine coming from the post–World War II publications that helped create the scholarly framework of American Jewish exceptionalism. In those immediate postwar years,

62. For examples of how these critiques of American Jewish exceptionalism have influenced Jewish studies, see Richard Frankel, “One Crisis Behind? Rethinking Antisemitic Exceptionalism in the United States and Germany,” *Journal of American Jewish History* 97, no. 3 (July 2013): 235–58; Rachel Kranson, “To Be a Jew on America’s Terms Is Not to Be a Jew at All”: The Jewish Counter-culture’s Critique of Middle-Class Affluence,” *Journal of Jewish Identities* 8, no. 2 (July 2015): 59–84; James Loeffler, “Nationalism without a Nation? On the Invisibility of American Jewish Politics,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 105, no. 3 (Summer 2015): 367–98.

63. Michael Kramer and Hana Wirth-Nesher, *The Cambridge Companion to American Jewish Literature* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 2.

## The Sin of American Jewish Exceptionalism

when historians and writers set down the American Jewish experience, their writing was suffused with gratitude for the United States. We might ask of these midcentury writers: How could these Jews—for it is not accurate to think of them only as scholars; they were *Jewish* scholars—not feel that they needed the United States, in the decade and a half after the Holocaust? Kramer and Wirth-Nesher's editorial remarks are Jewish studies scholarly voices of the early 2000s. Who can predict how they will sound in a generation or two, and what they might seem to reveal and conceal to future readers about the early twenty-first-century scholarly perspective? The mid-twentieth-century scholarly and lay voices expressing belief in American Jewish exceptionalism are also voices from a bygone era, revealing important truths.

### WHAT WE TALK ABOUT WHEN WE TALK ABOUT AMERICAN JEWISH EXCEPTIONALISM

Does American Jewish exceptionalism refer to the singularity of the *American* Jewish experience, as compared with Jewish experiences in other countries, or is it about the uniqueness of the *Jewish* experience in the United States, as compared with that of other ethnic, religious, immigrant, or minority groups? While it generally refers to the former—as the special issue of the *Journal of American Jewish History* in which Michels and Sorkin published their critiques made clear—it frequently carries with it a connotation of the latter. After all, it is difficult to discuss the unusual circumstances of *American* Jews without then discussing how these Jews contributed to American society in ways that differ from other groups. This is a research path that unsettles many scholars of American Jews. It isn't only that comparing Jews with other religious, ethnic, or immigrant groups presents more work for the scholar, although that is also an obstacle. Comparison can also be uncomfortable. It opens up the possibility of concluding or implying that one group is somehow superior to another. Similarly, exceptionalist arguments, either implicitly or explicitly, make the case for the potential superiority of a group or a country. These are arguments and assertions that many contemporary scholars of Jews would rather avoid.

It is difficult, however, to escape the impression that some contemporary scholars of American Jews may have an easier time thinking comparatively about American Jews. Historian David Hollinger is one example. His assessment of postwar American Jews: “Jewish experience since 1945 is the most dramatic single case in all of American history in which a stigmatized descent group that had been systematically discriminated against under the protection of law suddenly became overrepresented many times over in social spaces where its members' progress had been previously inhibited.”<sup>64</sup> It seems probable that many Jewish scholars would be uncomfortable making Hollinger's point as starkly as he does. It is worth noting, too, that Hollinger has written a book titled *Jews, Science, and Secular Culture* about the “ethnoreligious transformation of the academy by the Jews”—another topic that would probably make many

64. David Hollinger, “Rich, Powerful, and Smart,” *Jewish Quarterly Review*, 94, no. 4 (Fall 2004): 596.

Jewish scholars skittish.<sup>65</sup> The American historian of religion Tisa Wenger is another contemporary non-Jewish writer who thinks deeply and comparatively about Jews and other religious groups in America in ways that allow her to make unambiguous statements about how the Jewish American experience has differed from that of other groups. In her study of American religious freedom, Wenger writes, “The rhetorics of religious freedom would help American Jews escape the stigma of racial minority status, easing their acceptance into the racial privileges of whiteness in American life.”<sup>66</sup>

To be sure, Jewish scholars of American Jews have written on topics related to those addressed by Hollinger and Wenger, often making very similar points. But the way they make their points differs, primarily because of their foregrounding of *ambivalence* as an emotion surrounding post-World War II Jewish transformation.<sup>67</sup> In other words, when Jewish scholars write about mid-twentieth-century Jews and the advantages that came with their newfound postwar identity as middle-class, white, educated, and suburban adherents of a *religion*, as opposed to their earlier status as members of a despised race, current Jewish scholars accentuate the ambivalence of the Jews of that time about these shifts. The question, however, is whether most 1940s and 1950s Jews truly felt ambivalence about their whiteness, affluence, or newfound middle-class positionality, or, whether it was the early twenty-first-century Jewish scholars who felt ambivalent about finding evidence that so many Jews of that earlier era largely ran, not walked, toward their new status.

It is difficult, and maybe not even worthwhile, for a scholar to remove her affective response to the facts she uncovers from the history that she writes. Scholars’ sympathies, attractions, ambivalences, and repulsions are intertwined with the subjects they choose to study, making books the products not only of research, but of an individual scholar’s politics, interests, background, and life experiences.

65. David Hollinger, *Jews, Science, and Secular Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 7.

66. Wenger, *Religious Freedom*, 13.

67. Two exceptional, recent books within the field of American Jewish studies include this foregrounding of ambivalence: Rachel Kranson’s *Ambivalent Embrace* and Eric Goldstein’s, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006). Through their use of ambivalence as a key category, Goldstein and Kranson expand our understandings of the affective experience of Jews; ambivalence allows us to understand a spectrum of emotions and experiences of Jews, and distances us from less nuanced, more black-and-white categories such as “assimilation” that were employed more frequently by historians in the past. Ambivalence featured prominently in earlier works, such as Charles Liebman, *The Ambivalent American Jew: Politics, Religion, and Family in American Jewish Life* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1973), in which Liebman argued that American Jewry’s ambivalence was characterized by the competing desires between integration into gentile society and survival of Jewish particularism. In 2000, Michael Kramer published a review essay titled, “Beyond Ambivalence: (Re)imagining Jewish American Culture; or, ‘Isn’t That the Way the Old Assimilated Story Goes?’” *American Jewish History* 88, no. 3 (2000): 407–15. In his analysis of recent work by Stephen Whitfield and Sylvia Barack Fishman, Kramer argued that American Jews had moved beyond their former ambivalence of integration and survival, and expected to have both desires fulfilled.

## The Sin of American Jewish Exceptionalism

Students of history have long accepted that histories reveal almost as much about the historian's time period as they do about the time period under investigation. The paragraph or two that academic authors often include in their book's introduction that expresses some of the author's own response to the facts discovered and/or motivations for a particular methodology and set of sources is helpful in making this aspect of a book transparent, and maybe even in moving beyond it. In *Ambivalent Embrace: Jewish Upward Mobility in Postwar America*, Rachel Kranson's introduction sends vital information to readers about the book's direction: "This project uncovers the flipside to these declarations of mutual compatibility between American and Jewish values."<sup>68</sup> That flipside includes the "doubts, desires, and aspirations of postwar Jews as they embraced, however ambivalently, the American Dream."<sup>69</sup> These kinds of introductions show what the author seeks to uncover and highlight, without unduly presenting the author's affective response to facts uncovered.

Yet, for critics of American Jewish exceptionalism, one of the problems with midcentury histories written by authors such as Handlin, Halpern, Herberg and others is that the author's affective response often seems all too apparent. An example: in his 1960 book, *The Jew within American Society*, C. Bezael Sherman concludes about American Jews that "if on the other hand, their group identity is founded on their will to live and to enrich America with whatever creative originality they possess—then they will be able to make of their exceptional status a joy to themselves and a blessing for the United States."<sup>70</sup> It is the kind of statement likely to set the critics of American Jewish exceptionalism on edge, most likely discomfited by the amount of emotion at the forefront of what were often academic publications.

### THE SIN OF AMERICAN JEWISH EXCEPTIONALISM

In 1952, the Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr published *The Irony of American History*. An influential voice in politics, ethics, and foreign policy, Niebuhr was a supporter of US intervention in World War II, and in 1946 "was a drafter and signatory of the Federal Council of Churches statement that the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was 'morally indefensible.'"<sup>71</sup> Niebuhr's political perspective hailed from the Left, but as has been pointed out by others, his views varied over the course of his lifetime.<sup>72</sup> Niebuhr had been a Christian Socialist, a pacifist, and a staunch anticommunist, among other

68. Kranson, *Ambivalent Embrace*, 14.

69. *Ibid.*, 16

70. C. Bezael Sherman, *The Jew within American Society* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1960), 227. Sherman is a reminder of the range of midcentury exceptionalist voices. Unlike Herberg, Sherman believed that Jews would remain a distinctive *ethnic* group, but he saw Jews as exceptional among European immigrants in their ability to retain their ethnic particularity.

71. Brian Urquhart, "What You Can Learn from Reinhold Niebuhr," *The New York Review of Books*, March 26, 2009.

72. Andrew Bacevich, introduction to *The Irony of American History*, by Reinhold Niebuhr (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), x.

positions.<sup>73</sup> In *The Irony of American History*, he discussed the circumstances that led to America's virtues having become its vices—of a mature country's hubristic “dreams of managing history,” eventually posing a threat to the world. Niebuhr wrote that the United States was in dire need of “a sense of modesty about the virtue, wisdom and power available to us for the resolution of [history's] perplexities.”<sup>74</sup> The country's lack of self-awareness, its sin of believing itself set apart from other nations, had led to distrust of the United States by other nations fearful of American power. “We cannot simply have our way, not even when we believe our way to have the ‘happiness of mankind’ as its promise,” Niebuhr warned.<sup>75</sup> Niebuhr did not use the term “American exceptionalism,” but he described this kind of thinking as having become sinful, as it led to American fantasies, or “messianic dreams” of being able to “coerce history in a particular direction.” Writing as a theologian, Niebuhr did not offend or surprise readers with his condemnation of exceptionalist thinking. It was in keeping with his role as a religious thinker that Niebuhr viewed exceptionalism and its concomitant expectation of controlling history as signs of a loss of faith in God.

Today, we live in a very different moment of exceptionalism. Unlike Niebuhr, scholars of Jewish studies are generally not writing as theologians, and yet scholarly critiques of American Jewish exceptionalism contain an echo of Niebuhr's moral condemnation. As I suggested at the start, it is not only that exceptionalist arguments may be historically inaccurate that bothers critics; there is also a sense that exceptionalist thinking is wrong, and for reasons similar to those Niebuhr stated: exceptionalist thinking can sound arrogant and lacking in self-awareness.

There are additional layers to this moral condemnation of exceptionalism. Since 2016, exceptionalist discourse has sounded distressingly similar, to many academics, to the “Make America Great Again” nationalism of the Trump administration. Even before Trump, social movements such as Black Lives Matter raised consciousness about whiteness and privilege in such a way as to place the whiteness of American Jews in a new and far less flattering light, turning the subject of Jews and whiteness into a topic of discussion beyond academic circles.<sup>76</sup> With this frame of reference for thinking about Jews, whiteness, class, and privilege, reviewing the postwar era has become a project of confronting uncomfortable truths about the comfort of American Jews. It is as if, upon studying the post–World War II era when American Jews became more solidly middle class, mainstream, white, and privileged, twenty-first-century academics feel remorse for the paths taken, and the paths not taken, by midcentury Jews as

73. Bacevich, introduction to *Irony of American History*, x.

74. Niebuhr, *Irony of American History*, 174.

75. *Ibid.*

76. A few of the many examples of the Jews, whiteness, and privilege conversation having entered the mainstream: Yavilah McCoy, “Trayvon Martin: Reflections on the Black and Jewish Struggle for Justice,” *Tikkun*, January 10, 2014; Gil Steinlauf, “Jews Struggled for Decades to Become White. Now We Must Give Up White Privilege to Fight Racism,” *Washington Post*, September 22, 2015; Emma Green, “Are Jews White?,” *The Atlantic*, December 5, 2016.

## The Sin of American Jewish Exceptionalism

they ascended to a higher status in American society. And it is not just regret that twenty-first-century Jewish academics may feel, in looking back at a time when a large cohort of American Jews chose mainstream white affluence; it is also a kind of censure. To contemporary scholars of Jews, the post–World War II path to becoming white and mainstream carried with it the cost of Jews seeming to lose their radical edge. Thus, the voices of midcentury American Jewish exceptionalism are often difficult, if not painful, for many academics to read. Even as these 1950s writers proclaimed gratitude and wonder for the seeming miracle of a new-found status (or as Nathan Glazer called it in 1957, their new position of “most favored religion”), we now know, with historical retrospect, that these same voices were witnessing the loss of other possibilities—paths that may have allowed greater numbers of Jews of the past seventy years to work in alliance with other marginalized groups.<sup>77</sup>

To return to the theory of Jacqueline Rose, midcentury voices of American Jewish exceptionalism wore their nearly realized fantasies of unprecedented social belonging on their sleeves—expressions of celebratory emotions that now, within a context of understanding who was *not* being integrated in post–World War II American society, may give offense. To today’s readers, midcentury American Jewish exceptionalism sounds arrogant and blind to the suffering of other groups who were not experiencing similar postwar good fortune. It is difficult not to judge their exceptionalism, for all that it blinkered believers from seeing, as an error. And maybe it was. But charting the contours of the exceptionalism discourse—rather than excluding these voices—allows us to better understand individuals from the past, their choices, and their emotional universes, whether or not we approve of them today.

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77. In a similar vein, Shaul Magid describes how the popularity of the midcentury Judeo-Christian tradition, which was a component of midcentury American Jewish exceptionalism, “invit [ed] the Jew to have a hand in wielding the hammer of power against the non-Judeo-Christian.” Magid, “Judeo-Christian Tradition.”